Title: 'In The Waiting Room of History': The Politics of Subalternity in the Select 'River Novels' from Bengal

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Synopsis

From time immemorial, the river has been the perennial source of civilization. Our ancient civilizations had flourished and prospered under the benevolence of rivers. With the advent of capitalist colonialist modernity into India, this traditional riverine culture had undergone enormous changes. As the focus gradually shifted towards the colonial metropolis, these rural riverine cultures had lost the due importance. The economic incursion in the name of modernity into the traditional structure of community life rendered them displaced and dislocated. But the existing historiography does not adequately explain the weak response of this river based community to the nationalist movement in Bengal. The present study explores the mental world of the people and examines the experiences, perceptions of the community residing on the banks of several rivers, as reflected in a host of river novels. Their silence in the mainstream colonial and neocolonial sociological discourse marks the very enigma of nation building which the modern nation-state fails to encapsulate. The river novels provide that platform to witness this contest between the mighty power of nation and its dispossessed children. The agonies of dislocation on part of the community and the large scale exploitation of the nature on the other hand constitute the 'gap' within the monolithic narrative of national progress. This multifarious form of subalternity is the focal point from which this thesis would try to analyze the flip side of dominant modes of history writing in the context of river- based identities.

The rivers of Bengal are the most crucial geographical elements that shape the social, political and economic organization along with shaping the psychological responses, culture and religious practices of its people. Not surprisingly, therefore, the river centric environment has received mentions not only in the musical genres, local sayings and folklores but also in the rich clusters of Bengali literature. The river novels in recent days have become the constant subject of introspection. But what is not adequately probed is the deep connection between the rivers and its various communities and their response vis-a-vis the stories of development. Therefore, this thesis will look at the marginality of existence of both the nature and the communities and will try to locate and identify the loopholes in the nationalist historiography. For my purpose, I will take up Manik Bandyopadhyay's *Padma Nadir Majhi* (The Boatman of River Padma)(1935), Bibhutibhushan Bandopadhyay's *Ichamoti*(1950) Tarashankar Bandopadhyay's *Hansuli Banker Upokotha* (The Tale of Hansuli Turn)(1947-51), Advaita Mallabarman's *Titas Ekti Nodir Nam*(The Name of a River Titas)(1956), Samaresh Basu's *Ganga*(1957), Debesh Ray's *Teesta Parer Brittanto*(Stories on the Banks of River Teesta)(1988), Amitav Ghosh's *Hungry Tide*(2004) and certain other selected river novels to look at this marginality of existence. .

Subaltern Studies, on the other hand, focuses on the formation of bourgeoisie political modernity by the native elites in colonial era. The Indian elite internalized and used this language of political modernity, but this democratic tendency existed alongside and was juxtaposed with undemocratic relations of domination and subordination. This coexistence of two domains of politics, argues Guha was the index of an important historical truth, that is, the failure of the bourgeoisie to speakfor thenations. (Guha, 8) These directions of postcolonial criticism make it a disturbing and ambivalent practice, perched between traditional historiography and its failures, between the elite and the subaltern, within the folds of dominant discourses and seeking to rearticulate their pregnant silence. The nation- building, then, becomes a narcissistic project which continuously harps on creating a self, based on the politics of exclusion. As Sajal Nag argues, construction of nationhood is like the continuous peeling of an onion which the whole project of subaltern studies is vehemently opposed to. (Nag, 4753) As the colonial metropolis/ the new city is built on the ruins of villages, these river novels become the best avenues for examining the unequal distribution of justice, wealth during the fag end of colonial era and it also adumbrates dismal future of a newly independent nation. My contention is that this celebration of nature and the community is never a romantic engagement with the outside world, as exemplified by Tagore in his *Chinnapatra*, but fraught with the politics of the authors of the novels. The authorial direction and intervention makes these novels complex as it defies the logic of straightforward subaltern recuperation. This is always mediated and coloured by the novelist's own subjective engagement with the work of art.

The novels under discussion help to foreground the incompatible temporality that exists between the 'historical' and the 'primitive 'of Indian society. Following Simmel's argument in *Philosophy of Money* I would like to show that money becomes the only mode of interaction between these two antagonistic temporalities which is involved in *representing the non-present*. Money, the greatest gift of modernity, has become the sole mediator which could induce the 'primitives' to simulate the future oriented sensibilities. It leads the 'primitives' towards the path of world-historical. As all the novels finally end with the hopeless surrender of the 'primitives' to the forces of capitalist intersection, it records the overpowering presence of the capital in their lives. The dismal failure of casteist mobilization under the yoke of colonial-capital is the failure of creating a composite national identity that these novels hint at.

My hypothesis is that these river novels act as a site of contestation between the story of development and the saga of dislocation vis-a-vis Bengal in the latter half of twentieth century. The people and their culture suffer enormously for the disruption of the traditional value system as the state sponsored project of modernity takes place. Ramachandra Guha has pointed out that notion of developments in Third World countries are based on Western models of modernity. Similarly, ecological ideas about conservation/ use of natural resources come from the West and ignore the ancient social and cultural practices of local areas. He proposes a basic framework: environmentalism in poorer nations cannot be delinked from the issues of livelihood, distribution of wealth and social justices. (Guha, 150) Further, environmental movements (Narmada and Chipko) in India emanate from the basic demand on the part of the poor people to survive in their locality without interference. So the environmental concerns in India are grounded in this close dialogue between human and nature. This 'environmentalism of the poor' (Guha's own phrase) looks at this close interconnection and modifies the derivative concerns regarding environment and its developments. The river and the surrounding environment acts as the silent metaphor,

witnessing the loss of a culture and value systems. The diverse forms of marginality in all these novels attests to the fact that the 'Gargantuan' state is unaware of the plight that it causes to its own subject. The thesis is therefore interested in locating the marginality of both the nature and the community. With the help of postcolonial historiography, this thesis will endeavour to examine the alternative versions of Indian history which undertakes the project of resuscitating the lost and forgotten culture of these 'depressed class' through the lens of caste as their integration into the 'nation' is deferred.

Partha Chatterjee in his stringent critique of Indian nationalism observes that the mistaken, flawed trajectory of Indian nationalism was conceived in its very conception, in its desire to counter the colonial claim that the non Western world was fundamentally incapable of self rule. (Gandhi, 119) As the narrative of nation making achieves its generic closure with the mere construction of nation state, it heralds the violent absorption of the heterogeneous nationalist imagination within the singular trajectory of world historical development. (Gandhi, 120) This is what Tagore was also very critical of, as it ruins the very basis of our identity. In many of his texts (*Gora,Ghare baire,Raktakarabi* to name a few), he questions this form of nation state and instead prefers the idea of 'Swamaj'. In all this derivative formulation of nation state the low caste community residing on the banks of river still continues to suffer in the dark labyrinth of history.

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